

Stripping Away Archaic Ideologies: Reversing the Disappearance of the Hawkins Technique

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As many of the dancers, teachers, and choreographers of modern dance pass on their legacy, there is a question that must be posed to the dance field: are these historical techniques worthwhile and relevant to pass on to the next generation? Erick Hawkins (1909-1994), often marginalized in modern dance history, created one of these dance techniques which is based on physical free flow and consciousness in the moment of action. In this paper, I seek to unpack and tease out the threads of his legacy within the continued practice of the Hawkins technique. By looking at the evolution of the Hawkins technique, the salient threads of movement principles and dance philosophies emerge. For this research, I conducted seven interviews with contemporary Hawkins teachers. I have utilized their thoughts on the Hawkins technique to formulate and inform my argument. While the Hawkins technique has continued to change as it has been passed down to second and third generation Hawkins teachers, archaic language and movement practices still linger within Hawkins classes. I argue that, if current Hawkins teachers stripped away outdated ideologies, then the rapidly disappearing technique could make a resurgence in the contemporary dance field.

Hawkins's choreographic aesthetic and pedagogical ideologies are often difficult to separate. Free flow, buoyancy, and floating are all qualities that are harnessed in a traditional Hawkins class and are distinct movement qualities of Hawkins's choreography. In this paper, choreographic aesthetics and pedagogical ideologies will remain as separate entities. The purpose of this divide is to provide a deeper analysis of the technique. According to former Hawkins dancer Gloria McLean, Hawkins "kind of died saying, look I've had my adventure, go have your own," and this stance has resulted in a legacy of not just a free flow technique but one

that also evolves over time (McLean 2018). The Hawkins technique has the ability to adapt and change drastically while still remaining true to Hawkins's original movement ideologies. By teasing apart choreography and pedagogy, I bring to light the importance of Hawkins's pedagogical ideologies as opposed to his choreographic aesthetic.

Many of the current teachers of the Hawkins technique describe the form as universal. This word often causes cringing and visceral reactions from scholars within the field of dance studies. Former company director of the Erick Hawkins Dance Company Todd Rosenlieb stated that the Hawkins technique is the "universal technique for body alignment and for finding a reserve within the body itself" (Rosenlieb 2017). Statements such as this are not inherently meant to cause these visceral reactions. Instead, the statements are intended to address the versatility of the movement foundation that the Hawkins technique creates. These statements are misinterpreted because universal and universalism have been linked to a certain intellectual phenomenon in modern dance. The word universal, in relation to modern dance, is described as "the idea that all human beings shared essential characteristics regardless of the particularities of their lives or geographic location," which causes all people to view dance the same (Kowal 2010, 9-10). Due to being linked to the Western idea of superiority over other cultures, the word universal is not the word that should be used to describe the Hawkins technique. Instead of universal, I am proposing a change to the word "foundational." By changing the language from universal to foundational, Hawkins teachers will not be aligned with the historical connotations of universalism in modern dance. While universalism is a part of the history of modern dance, dance teachers should not teach with language harkening back to ideas of western, white superiority.

The Hawkins technique is not foundational for all dance; instead, the form is foundational to Western concert dance. This is an important distinction to make. Cori Terry, a former Hawkins dancer, believes that the Hawkins technique is foundational because "Erick taught principles of movement and he taught from a very somatic point of view" (Terry 2017). These principles of movement create a foundation that Rosenlieb believes dancers can utilize in western concert dance such as ballet and other modern dance techniques (Rosenlieb 2017). It is important to make this distinction because the principles of movement that are taught in the Hawkins technique are movement principles valued by western concert dance. The ability to take an upright torso through space efficiently is not a movement principal that is valued by all dance or all cultures. To update and ensure the relevance of the Hawkins technique, the language around the form needs to be brought into the twenty-first century, instead of remaining in the twentieth century.

Hawkins utilized a very specific idea of beauty in which to create and shape his technique. To find beauty, Hawkins turned to anatomical studies such as are found in the work of Mabel Todd who created ideokinesis. Todd's *The Thinking Body* laid out anatomical descriptions and instruction for how to move effectively and in a kinesthetically informed manner (Todd 1937, 3) This philosophy of kinesthetic correctness becomes Hawkins's maxim for dance technique. He wrote that "scientific truth, correctness, and efficiency in movement can be the only keystone to beauty" (Hawkins 1992, 66). With this philosophy, Hawkins created what he termed the "normative technique," a technique which he believed was essential for every dancing body to participate in because it was justified by scientific research. With a grounding in kinesiology, the current artistic director of the Erick Hawkins Dance Company, Katherine Duke states that Hawkins's free flow technique defined beautiful movement as "not strained or over-

muscled" (Duke 2017). The Hawkins technique amalgamated kinesiology, a contrived idea of beauty, and modern dance. Combining those ideas creates the platform on which discussion about the Hawkins technique can occur.

Hawkins created a technique that is centered around movement principles and anatomical study, instead of being based on distinct movement exercises. The "Hawkins training is the ongoing investigation of movement principles," which are constantly changing and evolving as new kinesthetic and somatic information is understood (Hawkins 2000). Due to the constant evolution of the technique a Hawkins dancer and researcher Laura Pettibone Wright states that "there is no form of Hawkins technique, there is just principles" (Wright 2017). Stating this does not mean that the exercises of the Hawkins technique should be thrown away. These exercises are an excellent way to find the movement principles and philosophies that are salient to the technique. However, these historical exercises are not the only way to get at these movement principles. A teacher can teach a Hawkins class without doing a single one of the historical exercises, so long as they continue to teach the tenets of the technique. This is because, as Rosenlieb stated, "the principles of the Hawkins technique are the same regardless of how we expand our ideas of class structure and exercises" (Rosenlieb 2017). The technique has been constantly evolving and changing from its conception. While the structure and class material may change over time, these classes are all threaded together by the principles that Hawkins created.

One of the movement principles that fuses the progressing Hawkins technique with the past is the continued use of the contraction and decontraction in the dance studio. These movements are essential to understand the efficiency required by the Hawkins technique. In contrast to the tension and extreme effort of the contraction found in the Graham technique, the

Hawkins contraction is simply the engagement of the muscle. The muscle should only be engaged as much as is needed to perform an exercise. The opposite of the contraction is the decontraction which is not a relaxation of the working muscles, but a lessening in the effort used to move the muscles (Celichowska 2000, 44-51). The goal is to utilize the minimum amount of energy necessary to complete a movement which will create efficiency and ease in the muscles. The balance of the contraction and decontraction require "practical experience with the principle of non-doing" (Bluthenthal 1996, 79). By only requiring the necessary muscles to work, the body can move efficiently through space without overwork or strain.

Hawkins's use of the contraction and the creation of the decontraction occurred because the conception of the Hawkins technique coincided with the personal and professional separation of Hawkins and Martha Graham. This connection is often overlooked in the careers of both Hawkins and Graham, who were influenced and inspired by the other. Hawkins "wished to be an artist who matched her in stature" throughout his entire career even though he was never able to achieve the same artistic prestige (Franco 2012, 77). By constantly striving for Graham's level of success, Hawkins carried over her legacy into the creation of his own technique. When he split from Graham to create his own school, he ensured that his dance ideologies were distinctly anti-Graham. The anti-Graham and anti-Hawkins rhetoric between the two artists has obscured the deeply rooted connections between the two artists and techniques.

When you view the Hawkins technique and the Graham technique next to each other, similarities emerge in the structure of the classes. Both techniques start seated, cross-legged, and with movements initiated from the pelvis. One of these exercises in the Graham technique is the simple contraction whereas in the Hawkins technique class begins with bounces. In the simple contraction dancers contract, rocking over their pelvises, then they fold at their waists to lengthen

their backs and then the dancer rock back to return to upright positions (Martha Graham Dance Company 2016). In the Hawkins bounces, dancers rock their bodies forward in space then continue the circle by rocking to the back of the ischial tuberosity, or sitz bones (Celichowska 2000, 83-85). While the circle in these exercises is in the opposite direction and executed with different intention, the basic tenet of rocking behind the pelvis to complete circular motions is very similar. The importance of pelvis-driven movement is a lasting connection between the two techniques.

The similarities in the initiation of movement beginning at the pelvis continue throughout the supine and standing work of the Hawkins and Graham techniques. Another exercise in which similarities occur is contractions lying supine (Celichowska 2000, 105). The image of the contraction in *The Erick Hawkins Modern Dance Technique* is a mirror image of the "Graham contraction." The movement is initiated from the pelvis, the head is thrown backwards, and the arms and hands yearn, or plead, towards the sky. Throughout the standing work of the techniques, a similar structure occurs. Similar stationary exercises are completed in the center work as well. These examples are some of the many similarities that can be found in the Hawkins and Graham techniques. As the Hawkins technique developed through time, there was more separation from the ideologies of Graham. However, the basic structures of both classes remain similar.

Hawkins retained the structure of the Graham technique class, but he altered the effort quality and intentions of his technique. Instead of focusing on intense contractions and shaped positions, he concentrated on release and movement flow. The intent of the Hawkins technique was to achieve effortless movement and seamless transitions (Celichowska 2000, 59). The combination of these actions creates the free-flow movement quality that Hawkins used to break

from the Graham technique. Free-flow describes the movement quality of this technique and it also describes the free-flowing mentality of execution of the movement. Dancers do not have to complete the Hawkins movement in exactly the same way as long as the movement principles are being performed correctly. With this change in effort quality and intention, Hawkins did change the way he wanted his dancers to view technique: not as shapes to be made but as a series of movement patterns.

Another important tenet of the Hawkins technique is the ability to move the pelvis through space effectively and, as with all Hawkins movement, efficiently. In the Hawkins technique, dancers learn that "as the pelvis continues to initiate and guide movement flow, other parts of the body go along for the ride" (Celichowska 2000, 85). By focusing on a technique in which the pelvis is the prime mover of the body, dancers find "stable, integrated and efficient movement" (Brown 1973, 40). This integration of the center of the body – which is located roughly in the pelvis in most dancers – allows for proximal control of the entire body.

Organization of the proximal body then allows the distal areas of the body to swing free or, as Hawkins termed it, tassel (Celichowska 2000, 54). If a dancer is able to utilize the weight of their pelvis to move through space, the dancer can transfer this skill of movement to other Western forms. While Western dance techniques may not share the same movement vocabulary as Hawkins, the organization of the pelvis is foundational to effective movement in many, if not all, of these western forms.

Hawkins viewed the hip sockets, or as he called them thigh sockets, as the most important joint in the body. Hawkins separated the thigh sockets from the pelvis, making them two distinct parts of the human body. While contemporary dance does not make this anatomical distinction, the principle of thinking of the pelvis and hip sockets as separate is important to

understand their function as leg joints in the Hawkins technique. Hawkins viewed these hip sockets as the most powerful joints in the body and taught that an activate awareness of these joints was imperative to be a good dancer (Celichowska 2000, 30). Duke states that by gathering the weight through the hip joints into the pelvis "you are working high so that the weight is constantly lifting out of the legs" (Duke 2017). This allows the legs to swing in the sockets and creates greater freedom in the legs. This also creates the buoyancy and weightlessness that is often associated with the Hawkins technique.

The weightless movement quality and use of the pelvis is showcased in the Hawkins across-the-floor work. In one exercise, dancers move in a grapevine, a series of steps moving sideways where one foot crosses in front of and then behind the other leg (Hawkins 2000b). This movement pattern mimics the intertwining of grapevines. During this movement, the dancers float their pelvises across the floor by lifting their weight into their core, allowing the legs to glide. The float of the pelvis, allows the movement to be done with ease. The execution of the grapevine creates an overcurve, an upward arc of weight. This ensures that the grapevine is completed without overworking the muscles to forcefully make the intertwining leg-work occur. The legs are free from the burden of too much weight which gives them the ability to perform the free flow movement of the Hawkins technique while also preparing dancers to work within other Western concert dance forms.

It is important to note that bringing the weight into the pelvis is an effective tool for dancers, but it is not a dance truth. It is something to utilize as needed but not something to strive to use at all times. By thinking of the hip sockets as a third leg joint, instead of a hip joint, problems may arise with gripping, tension, and bodily integration. With thinking of the hip joints as thigh sockets, the joint loses its dimensionality. It instead becomes a joint that can only be

accessed from the front of the body, from the quadriceps, or thighs. As Hawkins teachers train contemporary dancers, this dimensionality is important for the integration of the pelvis with the upper and lower body. While the Hawkins technique is adept at teaching dancers to move their pelvis through space, it is ineffective at teaching three-dimensional utilization of the hip joints. This dearth in the historical Hawkins work, which comes from outdated terminology, needs to be amended to facilitate the greater range of mobility in the pelvis that is required for contemporary dance. The weightless, buoyant momentum is important to understand; however, it cannot be the sole understanding of how to utilize the mobility and weight of the pelvis.

Hawkins was in his early forties when he created his technique, which affected its creation. Many dancers who are currently teaching the Hawkins technique worked with Hawkins as a much older man. Terry first met Hawkins when Hawkins was 61. Terry said that "he was kind of amazing, I just got him at the end of his teaching prowess" (Terry 2017). Hawkins was an older man when he created this technique which caused him to focus differently on how the body was moving and not just on what the body was doing (Duke 2017). The image that is purveyed by the Erick Hawkins Dance Company is one that "focuses on a choreographer (often a man) as the genius who guides and shapes a group of dancers (often primarily women)" (Croft 2015, 25). However, due to Hawkins's age and later physical ability, a majority of his career was spent teaching through verbal communication instead of through moving. The teaching of younger generations of Hawkins dancers was often left to the women of his company including Cathy Ward and Cynthia Reynolds. Since Hawkins was unable to demonstrate movement in his later years, his salient lessons in dance came from the speeches he gave during class. These speeches placed importance on the philosophical elements being passed down to later generations of Hawkins dancers.

The speeches Hawkins gave, sometimes instead of dancing, would teach dancers how to be holistic artists, not just movers. Terry described Hawkins's class as a "mad intersection of university lecture and technique" (Terry 2017). These lectures would revolve around philosophy, current events, anatomical discussions, rants, or anything that Hawkins felt was important to discuss that day. For McLean, Hawkins's speeches were "another way that we were all absorbing the thinking behind the dances" (McLean 2018). The oral and visual stimuli that Hawkins gave his classes were both important; however, there was often an emphasis on the oral information. By speaking to his classes as much, or more than, dancing, the philosophies he spoke about, which were the significant concepts behind Hawkins's pedagogy, were what was passed on by Hawkins to the younger generations.

Many younger generations of Hawkins dancers learned the Hawkins technique from women such as Cathy Ward and Cynthia Reynolds. The translation of the Hawkins technique onto the female body, the transmission of that technique from a female body, and the teaching of this technique from a feminine perspective is an understood but rarely mentioned aspect of the Hawkins technique. Rosenlieb stated that Ward and her fellow Hawkins teachers "modernized the technique as the knowledge of the body came into play" (Rosenlieb 2017). As these female teachers learned more about anatomy and kinesiology, they evolved the physical actions of the Hawkins exercises and of how the technique was conveyed to students. These women were participating in the shaping of the Hawkins form and determining how it evolved. Jessica Zeller wrote in her book *Shapes of American Ballet* that immigrant teachers contributed to the "embodied knowledge, intellectual acumen, and artistic perspectives" of American ballet (Zeller 2016, 2). In a similar vein, Ward and Reynolds were creating and maintaining the embodied knowledge and artistry of the Hawkins lineage. With the creative and pedagogical influence of

these women on the Hawkins technique, the technique was not the creation of a solo genius. Instead, this technique is marked by a history of an ever-evolving form which has been passed down to the current practitioners and teachers of the Hawkins technique.

A dance philosophy passed down from Hawkins to younger generations of dancers was, an awareness of the body, a sensory consciousness, that Hawkins coined "thinkfeel". Duke states that the idea of thinkfeel is a "deep way of moving and a conscious way of moving" (Duke 2017). This deep consciousness comes from creating a connection between the body and mind without separation. Hawkins believed that this separation of body and mind had occurred in Western culture and dance, and that it needed to be reversed (Hawkins 1992, 22). By creating dancers who understand wholeness of self, their internal sensations and kinesthetic understanding of the body are given as much emphasis, if not more, than external shapes. How the movement is occurring becomes as important as what movement is being executed. Often dancers "are not taught to observe [...] internal sensory activities" which causes a loss of presence in the body (Bluthenthal 1996, 81). By regaining and training the sensation of the internal and external body, dancers can actively engage this thinkfeel mentality. The thinkfeel imagery is beneficial because it allows dancers to engage completely with their bodies and minds without allowing their brain to have tyrannical rule over the body.

With the imagery of wholeness and oneness of self, somatic practices have become ingrained with the Hawkins technique. Many current Hawkins instructors are also certified in additional somatic practices such as Pilates, yoga, Alexander technique, and Rolfing. Penny Shaw, a former Hawkins dancer, stated that early Erick Hawkins Dance Company members were required to take private lessons in ideokinesis, which integrated somatic and anatomical principles with dance (Shaw 2017). This legacy of integration continued throughout the years.

McLean states that it allows dancers to have "knowledge of protecting the body," and of how to restore the body if it does become injured (McLean 2018). The integration of somatic practices and dance is one of the legacies that Hawkins should be remembered for. He actively required his dancers to learn about the body so that they could move efficiently and avoid as much injury as possible. This legacy continues to be seen in dance, particularly at the university level.

Professors of dance often bring skeletons, anatomy books, Alexander books and other resources into the dance studio to facilitate the same somatic integration that Hawkins championed. While Hawkins may not have been the first choreographer and teacher to integrate somatic practices with dance, he supported this integration and it has remained an important part of the Hawkins tradition.

The combination of the thinkfeel philosophy and somatic influences creates a unique physical presence for dancers who train in the Hawkins technique. In his writing, Hawkins states that it is important that dance "never ignores, either audience, or music or stage, or fellow dancers. Therefore, no frozen faces" (Hawkins 1992, 39). Onstage and in class, Hawkins dancers simultaneously look internally to their bodies' mechanics and also express themselves outwardly. They do not become so internal that they are no longer dancing for the audience. However, Hawkins dancers are not forcing their energy onto the audience either. Instead, Hawkins trained dancers are simply present, inviting the audience to watch their dancing. This presence is important for dancers to understand because it balances the two extremes of internal and external focus. By being able to access this middle ground, dancers are then able to push to either extreme but can still return to the neutral ground of being simply present. This middle ground also allows the dancer to further become in tune with themselves, achieving oneness of body and mind, and oneness of internal and external focus.

The holistic images that Hawkins championed were influenced directly by Eastern philosophies. He "found in Eastern philosophy an affirmation of the concept of wholeness" (Reynolds and McCormick 2003, 372). This wholeness in the body also created a circularity of energy which became foundational to his technique. Many of the floor work exercises of a traditional Hawkins class contain this circularity in the movements. One such exercise is the contraction-swing, which begins in a seated, cross-legged position in which the dancer twists to one side and rocks over the pelvis, supporting themselves with their hand. The movement then sweeps across the floor in front of the body and finds the same position on the other side. This is not an exercise of movement to static positions, instead, there is a rebound and gathering of energy to constantly renew the movement (Celichowska 2000, 88). This constant gathering of energy is an endlessly renewing cycle of circularity. Hawkins was constantly searching for justification for his views on dance such as with using kinesiology to justify his "normative" technique. The justification for the ideas of wholeness and circularity through Eastern philosophy was just one of the affirmations that Hawkins sought while creating his technique.

The last major tenet of the Hawkins technique is the creation of the rhythm of a dancer. This rhythm is unique to the physicality of the dancer and is not in relation or a reaction to music. However, Wright suggests that the rhythm of the music and this innate dancer rhythm may align at times, creating an equality between dance and music (Wright 2017). Often, McLean recalls that Hawkins would ask his dancers to "identify the pulse and the meter of the rhythm" (McLean 2018). By asking dancers to take control of their rhythmicity and notice rhythmic choices, dancers further become in tune with their craft and body. It also creates consciousness so that dancers can find the Hawkins presence and their thinkfeel connections within themselves.

The movement of dancers with this awareness is always performed on the correct counts, even when mixed meters, syncopation, and complex rhythmicity complicate the musical structure.

While complex rhythmicity occurs in the Hawkins technique, the technique also inhabits a very narrow set of dynamic ranges. All extremes are removed from the technique, focusing on the very middle range of dynamic possibilities. This does not train a dancer for the realities of contemporary dance. Susan Van Pelt Petry, a professor in the Department of Dance at The Ohio State University, has been exploring how "the release technique of the basic Hawkins work can be useful in training and still explore a range of dynamics" (Petry 2018). While there is a great sensitivity created in working within the middle range of dynamics, those dynamic shifts are often very minute. Dancers are currently being asked by contemporary choreographers to push from little dynamic impetus to extreme dynamics in the blink of an eye. This sensitivity to all dynamics, not just the middle range, needs to be brought into the Hawkins classroom.

The combination of the principles of movement in the Hawkins technique: efficient movement from the pelvis, awareness of the body, and rhythmic precision, demonstrates that the Hawkins technique is not just focused on completing movement, but why and how that movement is executed. By adopting my concept of the word foundational instead of universal, Rosenlieb's statement that this technique trains "a dancer not just to be a Hawkins dancer, but to be an overall dancer" correctly connotes the versatility of the Hawkins training (Rosenlieb 2017). The Hawkins technique creates a basis for efficient, effective, and knowledgeable movement of the body. Dancers learn how to complete movement within their own body's structure and why their body moves the way it does due to anatomical reasoning. These intertwine to showcase what the dancers are doing with their bodies clearly, without too many layers of aesthetic intent

over top. Simply put, the Hawkins technique directly relates a dancer to self, space, and time, three important concepts all dancers should understand.

Many of the movement principles of the Hawkins technique are important theories for dancers to learn; however, the Hawkins technique class cannot reside in the twentieth-first century if the Hawkins language is not updated. While the tradition of passing down Hawkins dance theories is an important part of the Hawkins tradition, not all of Hawkins viewpoints and language should have been passed down. Petry, “got uncomfortable with Hawkins himself and the position of the technique can tend to create an image of great refinement, based on a western ideal” (Petry 2018). Many of Hawkins's ideas on universality, beauty, normalcy, and ugliness are antiquated. They were created in Cold War America and thus represent that period's understanding of dance, culture, and humanity. In 2018, the ideologies of the 1950s, whether they derive from social policies, foreign affairs tactics, or dance language, should not be perpetuated. It is time to leave the ideas of Hawkins's beauty in the past unless it is being used in restaging Hawkins's choreography. The Hawkins technique should shake off those ideological shackles and step firmly into the twenty-first century.

Many Hawkins instructors are making changes to the Hawkins technique, adapting the form, and not maintaining pure Hawkins' exercises. Terry states that she “basically uses the same form of the class [...] I have kept some of it, of the form of it, but I have really really evolved the actual exercises” (Terry 2017). In a similar vein, Rosenlieb has been “utilizing the early exercises in their simplest form and then adding on and enhancing” these Hawkins exercises (Rosenlieb 2017). Experimentation, exploration, and evolution are part of the Hawkins technique. It is not a technique that is supposed to be static and remain a relic of modern dance history. Instead, adaptations are a part of the long history of modifications that have been made

to the technique from its inception. While Hawkins is no longer overseeing these adaptations, that does not mean they are not valid. His belief in a "normative" technique which adapts to new anatomical, kinesiological, and somatic information means that his descendants are in actuality not upholding Hawkins legacy if they do not adapt the Hawkins technique for the contemporary world.

What are the stakes of contemporizing a modern dance technique? The foundation that the modern dance techniques create aid in facilitating a wide range of dance vocabulary. Without understanding principles such as weight, time, and energy, dancers cannot engage with contemporary dance. While these techniques are useful, there are also many facets of movement principles and dance philosophies that are not relevant or useful to contemporary dancers. As teachers and dancers, the dance community must evaluate technique classes to "facilitate integration of the whole body through breathing, suppleness of muscular tone, minimizing of effort, and the use of gravity and momentum" to enable the creation of the contemporary dancer (Bluethenthal 1996, 77). The Hawkins technique is particularly equipped to facilitate this type of engagement with the body. However, to ensure that the Hawkins technique is still relevant to contemporary dancers, it must be updated. This calls for stripping away some of the ideologies and exercises that are a part of the historical Hawkins classes. Without stripping away outdated, archaic ideologies and language, the Hawkins technique will continue to sink into extinction. Nevertheless, if the current Hawkins instructors are willing to take the steps to contemporize the technique, the course of extinction can be reversed.

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